

To Teach

The Journey of a Teacher

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About the Author

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Beginning: The Challenge of Teaching

The words *teaching* and *teacher* evoke in almost everyone particular memories and images. For some, these memories are dull, even fearful—they include boredom, routine, and worse. For those of us who construct lives in teaching, these images are necessarily changing and growing, and while they are sometimes vivid and concrete, they can as often be characterized by wonder. In either case, images of teaching can fill us with awe, and we can choose to see within them an abiding sense of challenge.

A life in teaching is a stitched-together affair, a crazy quilt of odd pieces and scrounged materials, equal parts invention and imposition. To make a life in teaching is largely to find your own way, to follow this or that thread, to work until your fingers ache, your mind feels as if it will unravel, and your eyes give out, and to make mistakes and then rework large pieces. It is sometimes tedious and demanding, confusing and uncertain, and yet it is as often creative and dazzling: Surprising splashes of color can suddenly appear at its center; unexpected patterns can emerge and lend the whole affair a sense of grace and purpose and possibility.

I find fragments of my own teaching everywhere, like sections of a large quilt now filling my house, cluttering my mind. I remember Kelyn, a poor, five-year-old African-American child I taught years ago. One day, Kelyn and I, with a half-dozen other kids on a trip from school, were playing the "I Spy" game. "I spy something red and white with the letters S-T-O-P on it," I said. (My choices tend to be the easiest ones, and when too self-consciously geared toward "learning," the most boring as well.) "Stop sign!" cried seven voices in unison.

A big, brown truck pulled up to the stop sign opposite us. Darlene eagerly offered the next challenge: "I spy something brown."

Kelyn's eyes lit up and a broad smile crossed his face. He sat up as tall as he could, and with his right hand spread-fingered and flat on his chest and his left hand pulling excitedly on his cheek, he shouted, "Hey! That's me! That's me!"

No one sensed anything peculiar or taboo or funny in Kelyn's response. After all, Darlene had asked for something brown, and Kelyn is brown. But for me there was something more. I was glad Kelyn responded with gusto. In that classroom, we had spent a lot of energy on self-respect and affirmation and on exploring differences. Kelyn's father was active in the civil rights movement and his parents were conscious of developing self-esteem in their children. Kelyn was expressing some of that energy.

Once another child, Duke, asked me to sit with him while he did a portrait in crayon of the two of us. As he drew he talked about what he saw and how he would draw it. "You have yellow, curly hair," he said, "and mine's black and curlier." He didn't draw any noses, and he used two straight lines for our mouths. On another day Duke suddenly broke out laughing and, pointing at my nose, he said, "Your nose is so pointy and straight!" Everyone joined in laughing as I felt it, and guessed that they were right. "And your nose is flat and short," I said. Everyone started describing their own or someone else's nose: Renee's was straight, Mona's short, Cory's like a button—all different, each a new discovery.

Kelyn, Duke, and others were sometimes given to calling one another "nappy" or "nigger," and I was painfully aware of hurt and rage. Here, for example is a fragment of writing I found at that time, by eleven-year-old Carolyn Jackson (1966):

When I ride the train and sit next to a person of the opposite race/
I feel like a crow in a robin's nest/ And I feel dirty.

Carolyn has a powerful interpretation of what it means to be black in America: to be not wanted; to be "dirty"; to be a "a crow in a robin's nest." This was what I was teaching *against*, and Kelyn made me feel like we had accomplished a small victory.

I remember another classroom years later and José La Luz, abused and neglected, a posturing thirteen-year-old wise guy whose friends called him "Joey the Light." School failure fit José and followed him around like a shadow. Since he hated school and felt hurt and humiliated there, José made himself a one-man

wrecking crew—the path to the principal's office was a deep rut he walked many times.

My struggle was to find something of value in José that we might build on, something he knew how to do, something he cared about or longed for. In March I saw a knot of kids skateboarding over and around some huge drain pipes at a construction site near school, and in the middle of it all, king of the mountain, was José La Luz. I asked José some days later if he could teach a mini-course on skateboarding to the class. He agreed. Soon we were having insignia design contests, subscribing to *Thrasher* magazine, and repairing skateboards on Friday mornings in a shop designed by José in one corner of the classroom. No one lived happily ever after—there was no sudden or perfect turnaround for José—but a moment of possibility, a glimmer of what could be for him has remained in my mind.

And, finally, I remember a college seminar I taught on curriculum and instruction. The class was based on the notion that learning is a process of active discovery, and that learning depends on concrete experiences and contact with primary sources if it is to be lasting, meaningful, and, most important, if it is to lead to further growth and learning.

In that class we had seen films, read articles, and talked about schools where hands-on learning with children is the norm and not the exception. We had also experimented with discovery learning at our own, adult level. I felt then, as I do now, that it would be virtually impossible to teach in this way if you had never experienced the power of this approach as a learner. One assignment, for example, asked each student to develop an authentic question about the world, a question of some urgency or personal meaning, and then to go out and find the answer to that question by getting close to it, by touching it, and to document the whole process in a variety of ways. Later, students would use the question and the process as a model to develop curriculum with youngsters. While all students—schooled as most of us are in passivity and conformity—had a painful time finding a question ("I don't know what you want us to do." "Would 'the jury system' be an OK question?" "I'm not interested in anything.") some students eventually asked burning questions and were able to pursue sustained inquiries with astonishing results. One student, for example, whose sister was anorexic, investigated anorexia and became involved in an innovative support

project for families. Another asked what life was like for the children of alcoholics, and discovered what she had always denied but suspected: that her own mild-mannered, middle class father was a quiet alcoholic. A hearing-impaired student looked into the reactions of a middle class, residential neighborhood when a live-in facility for mildly disabled adults was established.

What I remember particularly about that seminar was one student—Elaine. Her first attempts at an authentic question had been, “What is the meaning of the Constitution?” and “How are race relations going in Chicago?” Finally she asked, “Where does the woman in the green shoes who I see every day outside Sam Marcy’s Restaurant sleep at night?” This question led her beyond a statistical and distanced view of homelessness and into a consciousness-expanding personal journey with Irene, the woman with the green shoes. She discovered a thriving shanty-town within half a mile of the university, a place of community and collectivity as well as of pain and poverty. She traveled to soup kitchens and to church basements, scrounged trash outside restaurants, panhandled at the train station. She uncovered personal histories: Irene’s story of the closing of a mental hospital where she was being treated for schizophrenia; John’s story of losing his job as a security guard when his firm lost a contract at the airport; Sharon’s story of an abusive husband and an ongoing struggle with alcohol. Elaine took pictures and recorded and transcribed interviews. She later developed a dazzling curriculum project filled with energy, experimentation, creativity, and open-endedness. It included an oral history component, a service project at a food pantry, an investigation of government policies and their impact on homeless people, and a weekend with the Mad Housers of Chicago, a group of housing activists who construct simple and livable (but not licensable) structures for the homeless.

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Before I stepped into my first classroom as a teacher, I thought teaching was mainly instruction, partly performing, certainly being in the front and at the center of classroom life. Later, with much chaos and some pain, I learned that this is the least of it—teaching includes a more splendid range of actions. Teaching is instructing, advising, counseling, organizing, assessing, guiding, goading, showing, man-

aging, modeling, coaching, disciplining, prodding, preaching, persuading, proselytizing, listening, interacting, nursing, and inspiring. Teachers must be experts and generalists, psychologists and cops, rabbis and priests, judges and gurus. And that’s not all. When we face ourselves, we face memories of our own triumphs and humiliations, of our cowardice and bravery, our breakthroughs and breakdowns, our betrayals as well as our fidelity. When we characterize our work—even partially, even incompletely—straightforward images and one-dimensional definitions dissolve, and teaching becomes elusive, problematic, often impossibly opaque.

One thing becomes clear enough. Teaching as the direct delivery of some preplanned curriculum, teaching as the orderly and scripted conveyance of information, teaching as clerking, is simply a myth. Teaching is much larger and much more alive than that; it contains more pain and conflict, more joy and intelligence, more uncertainty and ambiguity. It requires more judgement and energy and intensity than, on some days, seems humanly possible. Teaching is spectacularly unlimited.

When students describe us, the picture becomes even denser and more layered. Teachers are good and bad, kind and mean, unjust and fair, arbitrary and even-handed, thoughtful and stupid. For elementary school students, we embody the adult world and we are, next to parents, the strongest representatives of and guides into that world. The hopes and dreams of youth are in our hands; their goals and aspirations are shaped through their encounters with us. Positive memories of teachers are reserved for particular and special people: the teacher who touched your heart, the teacher who understood you or who cared about you as a person, the teacher whose passion for something—music, math, Latin, kites—was infectious and energizing. In any case, teachers are a large presence in the lives of students; we take up a lot of space and we have a powerful impact. This is why I chose teaching: to share my life with young people, to shape and touch the future.

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Teachers are asked hundreds, perhaps thousands of times why they choose teaching. The question often means: “Why teach, when you could do something more profitable?” “Why teach, since teaching is beneath your skill and intelligence?” The question can be filled with

contempt and cynicism or it can be simply a request for understanding and knowledge: "What is there in teaching to attract and keep you?" Either way, it is a question worth pursuing, for there are good reasons to teach and equally good reasons not to teach. Teaching is, after all, different in character from any other profession or job or occupation, and teaching, like anything else, is not for everyone.

There are many reasons not to teach, and they cannot be easily dismissed, especially by those of us who love teaching. Teachers are badly paid, so badly that it is a national disgrace. We earn on average a quarter of what lawyers are paid, half of what accountants make, less than truck drivers and shipyard workers. Romantic appeals aside, wages and salaries are one reflection of relative social value; a collective, community assessment of worth. There is no other profession that demands so much and receives so little in financial compensation; none in which the state stipulates such extensive and specific educational requirements, for example, and then financially rewards people so sparingly. Slight improvements in pay and benefits in some districts serve only to highlight how out of step we really are when it comes to valuing and rewarding teaching.

Teachers also suffer low status in many communities, in part as a legacy of sexism: Teaching is largely women's work, and it is constantly being deskilled, made into something to be performed mechanically, without much thought or care, covered over with layers of supervision and accountability and bureaucracy, and held in low esteem. Low pay is part of that dynamic. So is the paradox of holding teachers up as paragons of virtue (the traditional pedestal) while constraining real choices and growth.

Teachers often work in difficult situations, under impossible conditions. We are usually isolated from other adults and yet have no privacy and no time for ourselves. We teach youngsters who are compelled by law to attend school, many of whom have no deep motivation or desire to be there. We sometimes work in schools that are large, impersonal, and factory-like; sometimes in schools that resemble war zones. We are subject to the endless and arbitrary demands of bureaucracies and distant state legislatures. Teachers are expected to cover everything without neglecting anything, to teach reading and arithmetic, for example, but also good citizenship, basic values, drug and alcohol awareness, AIDS prevention, dating, mating, and relating, sexuality, how to drive, parenting skills, and whatever else comes up.

The complexity of teaching can be excruciating, and for some that may be a sufficient reason not to teach (for others, it is one of teaching's most compelling allures). Teachers must face a large number of students: thirty or more for typical elementary school teachers, a hundred and fifty for high school teachers. Each youngster comes to us with a specific background, with unique desires, abilities, intentions, and needs. Somehow, we must reach out to each student; we must meet each one. A common experience of teachers is to feel the pain of opportunities missed, potential unrealized, students untouched. Add to this the constancy of change and the press of time, the lack of support and the scarcity of resources, and some of the intensity and difficulty of teaching becomes apparent. It is no wonder that many of us retreat into something certain and solid, something reliable, something we can see and get our hands around—lesson plans, say, or assertive discipline workshops—because we fear burning out altogether.

These are some of the reasons not to teach, and, for me at least, they add up to a compelling case. So, why teach? My own pathway to teaching began long ago in a large, uniquely nurturing family, a place where I experienced the ecstasy of intimacy and the irritation of being known, the power of will and the boundary of freedom, both the safety and the constraints of family living. I was the middle child of five children and I had opportunities to learn as well as opportunities to teach. In my family, I learned to balance self-respect with respect for others, assertiveness with compromise, individual choice with group consciousness.

I began teaching in an alternative school in Ann Arbor, Michigan, called the Children's Community. It was a small school with large purposes; a school that, we hoped, would change the world. One of our goals was to provide an outstanding, experience-based education for the young people we taught. Another was to develop a potent model of freedom and racial integration, a model that would have wide impact on other schools and on all of society. We thought of ourselves as an insurgent, experimental counter-institution; one part of a larger movement for social change.

The year was 1965, and I was twenty years old. For many young people, teaching was not only respectable, it was one of the meaningful, relevant things a person could do. Many schools then, as now, were inhumane, lifeless places. We felt that we could save the schools, create life spaces and islands of compassion for children

and, through our work, help create a new social order. We were intent on living lives that did not make a mockery of our values, and teaching seemed a way to live that kind of life. We were hopeful and altruistic and we were on a mission of change.

Today, teaching may not seem so attractive, nor so compelling in quite the same way. Not only are the schools in even worse shape than before, and the problems seemingly more intractable, but there is a narrow, selfish spirit loose in the land. Idealists are "suckers" in the currency of the day, and the notion that schools should be decent, accessible, and responsive places for all children is just more pie-in-the-sky. With a combative social Darwinism setting the pace in our society, and a cynical sense that morality has no place in our public lives, teaching today can seem a fool's errand.

But it is not. Teaching is still a powerful calling for many people, and powerful for the same reasons that it has always been so. There are still young people who need a thoughtful, caring adult in their lives; someone who can nurture and challenge them, who can coach and guide, understand and care about them. There are still injustices and deficiencies in society, in even more desperate need of repair. There are still worlds to change—including specific, individual worlds, one by one—and classrooms can be places of possibility and transformation for youngsters, certainly, but also for teachers. Teaching can still be world-changing work. And this, I believe, is finally the reason to teach. People are called to teaching because they love children and youth, or because they love being with them, watching them open up and grow and become more able, more competent, more powerful in the world. They may love what happens to themselves when they are with children, the ways in which they become their best selves. Or they become teachers because they love the world, or some piece of the world enough that they want to show that love to others. In either case, people teach as an act of construction and reconstruction, and as a gift of oneself to others. I teach in the hope of making the world a better place.

While practically every teacher I have known over many years came to teaching in part with this hope, only a few outstanding teachers are able to carry it fully into a life in teaching. What happens? To begin with, most of us attend colleges or preparation programs that neither acknowledge nor honor our larger and deeper purposes—places that turn our attention to research on teaching or methods of teaching and away from a serious encounter with the

reality of teaching, the art and craft of teaching, the morality of teaching, or the ecology of childhood. Our love of children, our idealism, is made to seem quaint in these places. Later, we find ourselves struggling to survive in schools structured in ways that make our purposes seem hopeless and inaccessible. We may have longed for child-centered communities of shared values and common goals, but mostly we settle for institutions, procedure-centered places characterized by hierarchy, control, and efficiency. We may have imagined the kind of wonderful teachers we could become in an ideal world, but we had no idea of the obstacles that would be scattered along our pathway to teaching.

One common obstacle is the pressure not to teach. Family and friends question the choice to teach, and even experienced teachers advise young people to search somewhere else. One elementary school teacher I know, while in graduate school, worked as an assistant to a prominent education professor who told her repeatedly that she was too bright and too able to be a teacher. She found herself defending her choice against a person she thought would be an obvious ally but was not, and she learned an important lesson: The profession is full of people who don't respect its purposes. If teaching is to become vital and honorable again, it is teachers who will have to make it so. It is the voice of the teacher that must at last be heard.

Another obstacle is the chorus of references to the "real world," as in, "Now this school is the real world." The point is to tell you that you are naive and foolish and that this school is immutable, that it has always been as it is and that it can never be changed. School, in this view, is not an institution of society or history, not something created by people, but rather something outside of history, agency, and choice. Teachers and students alike are supposed to compromise, accommodate, and adjust; to be compliant, conformist, and obedient.

There is a related, even more subtle sapping of your energy and mind as you submit to the structure of schooling. I observed a principal recently welcoming a group of new teachers to his school. Indoctrinating may be a more accurate word. He began by praising these teachers, by admiring their commitment and acknowledging their youthful energy and idealism. There were smiles and a sense of worth and pride all around. Then, without changing tone or expression, he began to caution them about the families and the

children they would encounter, warning them that they should not expect too much from these youngsters. "Your idealism is wonderful, just what our school needs," he concluded. "But don't blame yourselves if you can't teach these kids to read. It will be enough if you can get them to listen."

All the praise of youth and admiration of idealism turns out to be a cover for cynicism. These teachers are being told to accept something that is really unacceptable, to "grow up," to lower their expectations for learners. It is true that teachers need to grow in experience, skill, and judgment. But that growth does not need to be based on narrowing goals, aspirations, and ideals, as this principal would have it. It is true that teaching is the kind of activity that develops and flowers over time, that there is no way to be an experienced teacher without first being a *new* teacher. But that development can be constructed on the basis of high ideals, hope, realism, and compassion for others. Teachers do, indeed, need to be forgiving of their own inevitable shortcomings, but always in the context of being critical and demanding of themselves as well.

Finally, a major obstacle on the pathway to teaching is the notion that teaching is essentially technical, that it is easily learned, simply assessed, and quickly remediated. Students of teaching spend an inordinate amount of time learning how to make lesson plans (an astonishingly simple, entirely overblown, and not very useful skill) or reading the research on classroom management. We are encouraged to attend to the voice of the supervisor and the administrator, the academic and the researcher, and not to the more immediate and important voices of children and their parents. This is, perhaps, the most difficult obstacle to overcome, and resistance and reconciliation are major themes in the act of effective teaching.

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I know that I celebrate a kind of teaching that is exceedingly rare. I know that becoming an outstanding teacher is an heroic quest: One must navigate turbulent and troubled waters, overcome a seemingly endless sea of obstacles, and face danger and challenge (often alone), on the way toward an uncertain reward. Teaching is not for the weak or the faint-hearted; courage and imagination are needed to move from myth to reality.

Teaching is entombed in myth—there are literally thousands of tiny ones clinging like barnacles to teaching, while others perch on it like giant, fire-breathing creatures. These myths are available in every film about teaching, in all the popular literature, and in the common sense passed across the generations. Here is a sample:

MYTH 1

*Good Classroom Management is an Essential First Step
Toward Becoming a Good Teacher*

This myth is central to the everyday lore of teaching. It is the old "don't-smile-until-Christmas" wisdom. Some teachers say, "I get tough in September to gain their respect, and then I can ease up without losing control." Others say, "I play 'bad cop' first so they know who's boss, and then I can afford to be 'good cop'."

There is a sleight-of-hand involved here, for it is true that an out-of-control classroom is dysfunctional for everyone. But what makes this a myth is (1) its linearity—the assumption that classroom management precedes teaching in time and (2) its insularity—the notion that classroom management can sensibly be understood as an event separated from the whole of teaching. The classroom management myth represents, in a sense, the triumph of narrow behaviorism and manipulation over teaching as a moral craft.

The ability to work productively with a large group of students is a skill that comes with experience. The development of that skill is not aided by focusing on techniques from the pantheon of classroom management: "positive reinforcement," "anticipatory set," "wait time," and all the rest. Those simply turn a teacher's attention in the wrong direction. Nor is it useful to assume that once in control, teaching can begin. There are a lot of quiet, passive classrooms where not much learning is taking place, and others where children's hearts and souls are being silently destroyed in the name of good management.

Working well with a group of youngsters is something learned in practice. And it is best learned not as a set of techniques to shape behavior without regard to persons or values, but while attempting to accomplish larger goals and purposes. This means focusing on

three essentials: youngsters (Are they active? Are they pursuing questions and concerns of importance to them and us?); the environment (Is it appropriate? Does it offer sufficient challenge? Are there multiple opportunities to succeed?); and curriculum (Is it engaging? Does it connect the known to the unknown?). While this will not yield instant "results," it will allow for the emergence of more authentic and productive teachers and teaching relationships, and questions of group coherence and standards of behavior can then be worked out in context.

MYTH 2

Teachers Learn to Teach in Colleges of Education

This myth floats pervasively (if uneasily) on the surface of society as a whole, but teachers don't believe it for a minute. Teachers know that they learned to teach on the job (and unfortunately, some of what is learned on the job is never subjected to serious scrutiny), and that their journey through teacher education was painfully dull, occasionally malevolent, and mostly beside the point. Some teachers believe that a few college courses could have been useful if they had been offered during the first years of actual classroom experience, instead of being dished out as "truth" disconnected from the messy reality of schools.

When teacher education programs structure the separation of theory and practice, this message alone is enough to degrade teaching. When we imply that teaching is quickly learned and easily fixed (like learning the fox trot); that it is based on methods and techniques or on little formulas; that it is generic, in the sense that learning to teach in Hannibal equips a teacher for teaching in Harlem—then teaching can be killed off entirely.

Teaching is an eminently practical activity, best learned in the exercise of it and in the thoughtful reflection that must accompany that. This reflection should be structured into the teaching day, and should be conducted with peers, and with more experienced people who can act as coaches or guides, and can direct a probingly critical eye at every detail of school life. The complexity of real teaching can then be grasped, and the intellectual and ethical heart of teaching can be kept in its center.

MYTH 3

Good Teachers Make Learning Fun

Fun is distracting, amusing. Clowns are fun. Jokes can be fun. Learning can be engaging, engrossing, amazing, disorienting, involving, and often deeply pleasurable. If it's fun, fine. But it doesn't need to be fun.

MYTH 4

Good Teachers Always Know the Materials

This is tricky. On the one hand, teachers need to know a lot, and good teachers are always reading, wondering, exploring—always expanding their interests and their knowledge. Who would argue for knowing less? On the other hand, since knowledge is infinite there is simply no way for any teacher to know everything. The game some teachers play of trying to stay one step ahead in the text in order to teach the material is ludicrous. That game assumes that knowledge is finite and that teaching is a matter of conveying the same limited stuff to students, who are themselves beneath respect, incapable of thinking outside the informational realm of "one step forward at a time."

Many fine teachers plunge into the unknown alongside their students, simultaneously enacting productive approaches to learning and demonstrating desirable dispositions of mind, like courage and curiosity. A unit on machines in elementary school might involve bringing in broken household appliances and working together to understand how they function. A unit on Asian immigration in high school might involve a collective search through newspaper archives or interviews in the community. Learning with students can be a powerful approach to teaching. Good teachers often teach precisely so that they can learn.

MYTH 5

Good Teachers Begin With the Curriculum They Are Given and Find Clever Ways to Enhance It

Good teachers begin with high expectations for learners and struggle to meet those expectation in every instance. Too often the ques-

tion is, "Is it practical?" when the question ought to be, "Is it passionate?" The given curriculum can be a guide or an obstacle, a framework or a hindrance, a resource or a barrier. The point is to get the job done, and sometimes that means starting elsewhere and circling back to the official curriculum simply to satisfy administrators.

MYTH 6

Good Teachers Are Good Performers

Sometimes. But just as often, good teachers are not charismatic and are not exhibitionists. Certainly they are not "center stage," because that place is reserved for students.

When I taught preschool, much of my work was behind the scenes, quiet, unobtrusive. One year, a student teacher paid me a high compliment: "For two months, I didn't think you were doing anything. Your teaching was indirect, seamless, and subtle, and the kids' work was all that I could see."

This myth of teachers as performers strips teaching of much of its depth and texture and is linked to the idea that teaching is telling, that teaching is delivering lessons or dispensing knowledge. This is a tiny part of teaching, and yet in myth it is elevated to the whole of it.

MYTH 7

Good Teachers Treat all Students Alike

It is important for teachers to be fair, to be thoughtful, to be caring in relation to all students. If all students were the same then a good teacher would treat them all the same. But here is Sonia with an explosive anger that can take over the room, and she needs more; here is James, whose mother died recently, and he needs more; here is Angel, who cannot speak English, and he needs more. Needs shift and change. When I was a new teacher and Kevin showed up one day without lunch money, I gave him the necessary fifty cents; several colleagues encouraged me to let him go hungry or I'd "be buying every kid's lunch every day." It never happened.

In a family, the nighttime fears of one child might take considerable focus and energy for a time, and then the struggle of another

child to read takes over. Helping the two children in kindergarten who are having difficulty separating from their mothers assures all children that this is a safe and friendly place. Good teachers spend time and energy where they must, and expect that positive results will spread laterally among the group.

MYTH 8

Students Today Are Different From Ever Before

Every generation of adults tells of a golden age of teaching or parenting when youngsters were well-behaved and capable. This misty-eyed view is typically a highly-edited version of their own youth. Some teachers claim to have been outstanding early in their careers, but now assert: "I can't teach *these* kids." Today, the justifications for this are put in terms of "cocaine babies" and "households headed by women," where once it was the "culture of poverty" and "cultural deprivation," and before that, "immigrants who didn't care about their children."

The fact is that kids come to school with a range of difficult backgrounds and troubling experiences. They come from families, each of which has strengths and weaknesses. Teachers, as always, must resist the idea that there is some ideal child with whom they would be brilliant; they must reject the notion that a child's success is determined by family background or circumstance; they must respond to the real children coming through the door and find ways to teach them. That has always been a complex and difficult goal and it will always be so.

MYTH 9

Good Teaching Can Be Measured by How Well Students Do on Tests

Besides the many problems related to standardized testing, there are also problems that revolve around the connection of teaching to learning. Learning is not linear; it does not occur as a straight line, gradually inclined, formally and incrementally constructed. Learning is dynamic and explosive and a lot of it is informal; much of it builds up over time and connects suddenly.

MYTH 10

A Good Teacher Knows What's Going on in the Classroom

Teachers know *one* story of what's going on, but not the *only* story nor even the "true story." True stories are multitudinous because there are thirty-some true stories. Kids are active interpreters of classroom reality and their interpretations are only sometimes synonymous with their teacher's interpretations. Classrooms are yeasty places, where an entire group comes together and creates a distinctive and dynamic culture; sometimes things bubble and rise; sometimes they are punched down or killed off.

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Teaching is a human activity, constrained and made possible by all the limits and potential that characterize any other human activity. Teaching depends on people—people who choose to teach and other people who become students, by choice or not. There are these two sides to teaching, and on each side there are human beings, whole people with their own unique thoughts, hopes, dreams, aspirations, needs, experiences, contexts, agendas, and priorities. Teaching is relational and interactive. It requires dialogue, give and take, back and forth. It is multi-directional. This explains in part why every teaching encounter is particular, each unique in its details.

When Jakob learned to read, for example, he was five years old, a student in my class, and he accomplished this feat without formal instruction. He felt strong and independent and important as a person, and he approached most things with courage and confidence. Reading was no different. He loved hearing stories read, and he had many favorites. He dictated his own stories to accompany pictures he painted. And he could read bits and pieces from his environment: "stop," "pizza," "fruit." One day, he announced he could read. He read a couple of familiar stories, moved on with occasional help, and never looked back. He was reading.

Molly read at six. She watched from a distance when she was in my class as others learned to read, and she looked hard at her own books. She never asked for help, and when help was offered she pushed it away. And then she apparently made a decision that she could do it, that the time had come. She asked me to teach her to

read. We sat down and read for two hours. We recognized easy words together and then more difficult ones. We discussed letter sounds and the mystery of phonics. Within a few days she felt like she, too, was a reader.

Shawn learned to read independently at eight, some years after he had been my student. Reading had been a goal for years, but it seemed out of reach to him. He struggled hard to get it, and I struggled to help, both by making him comfortable and by offering a range of reading strategies and opportunities. He found phonics both an incredibly helpful aid and a consistent betrayer. Slowly, painstakingly, he broke the code in the second grade, and read. When he was nine, he was as sophisticated a reader as any of his classmates, and the early frustration was a distant memory.

Each of these learners was different, each had his or her own specific talents, styles, obstacles, and needs. Each demanded a teacher who could invent an appropriate response to a unique encounter.

A powerful, perhaps dominant, view of teaching, holds that teaching is little more than the simple and efficient delivery of curriculum. There is little need for adjustment, no need for dialogue. In the dominant view, teachers are glorified clerks or line employee, functionaries whose job it is to pass along the wisdom and the thinking of some expert, academic, or policy-maker: here is the literary canon; here is the truth of history; here is the skill of reading. The teacher is near the base of the educational hierarchy, just above the student, who is the very bottom of the barrel. Years ago, there was serious talk of making the curriculum "teacher proof," creating packages that even thoughtless, careless people could pass along. The idea behind "new math," for example, was that teachers would transmit something they neither experienced nor understood, and that a generation of brilliant math students would somehow emerge, bypassing teachers altogether. This was, of course, a monumental failure, and that talk has been largely discredited. Today teachers are expected to develop "critical thinking" and "ethical reflection" in youngsters without opportunities to think critically or reflect on values in their own lives. These approaches to reform are folly. The current enthusiasm for some imagined artificial intelligence that will replace the need for thinking, committed teachers in classrooms is only the most recent high-tech version of the old idea of teacher-as-clerk.

I have been a teacher for over twenty years. In that time, I have taught at every level, from preschool to graduate school: I have taught reading, math and social studies, research methodology, and philosophy. I have cared for infants in a day care center and for juvenile "delinquents" in a residential home. In every instance, there has been discovery and surprise, for me as much as for my students. Human relationships are just that way; surprising, idiosyncratic, unique, and marked by variety. Over time, a basic understanding about teaching has emerged and become deeply etched in my own consciousness: Good teaching requires most of all a thoughtful, caring teacher committed to the lives of students. So simple and, in turn, somehow so elegant. Like mothering or parenting, good teaching is not a matter of specific techniques or styles, plans or actions. Like friendship, good teaching is not something that can be entirely scripted, preplanned, or pre-specified. If a person is thoughtful, caring, and committed, mistakes will be made, but they will not be disastrous; if a person lacks commitment, compassion, or thought, outstanding technique and style will never really compensate. Teaching is primarily a matter of love. The rest is, at best, ornamentation, nice to look at but not of the essence; at worst it is obfuscating—it pulls our attention in the wrong direction and turns us away from the heart of the matter.

Of course, we cannot love what we neither know nor understand. Nor can we teach someone entirely outside our capacity for empathy or comprehension. No one can teach someone they hate, or despise, or find unworthy; someone completely alien or apart from some sense of a shared humanity. On the other hand, sustained interest in and deep knowledge of another person is in itself an act of love, and a good preparation for teaching.

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Maxine Greene (1973), teacher-philosopher, argues that "the teacher who wishes to be more than a functionary cannot escape the value problem or the difficult matter of moral choice" (p. 181). We recognize, in the first place, how routinely we are made into functionaries. Even as society occasionally posits a romanticized view of the dedicated, caring, inspiring teacher—brilliant, creative, self-motivated—we know that the harsh reality in many schools is

a structure that disempowers and deskills, a system that prespecifies each teacher's thoughts and oversees and constrains our activities. In large, impersonal systems, teachers become obedient, they conform, and follow rules—we are expected to deliver the curriculum without much thought, and control the students without much feeling. Students are expected, in turn, to follow the rules and go along with whatever is put before them. The key lessons for everyone in such a school system, top to bottom, are about hierarchy and one's place in it, convention and one's obligation to it, and unquestioning passivity in the face of authority.

We become party to our own depersonalization, and to the thoughtlessness of our students, when we see ourselves as merely place-holders and low level bureaucrats, filling out forms and completing procedures. Visiting a classroom recently, a teacher welcomed me and added proudly, "We're on page 257 of the math text, exactly where we're supposed to be according to board guidelines." She was, indeed, on page 257, but several students were clearly lost, a few were actually sleeping, and virtually every student in that class was failing math. For this teacher, the received curriculum—certainly not the children and certainly not her own ideas and ideals and worthwhile projects—had become the central thing; powerful, wise, and unchallenged. She was marching through it as instructed, herself a victim of this approach. Everyone was a loser; the children through a narrowing of life chances and possibilities; the teacher through a degraded sense of her calling and her work.

Teachers, then, too often implement the initiatives of others; we pass on someone else's ideas of what is valuable to know or experience, and we cultivate a sense of "objectivity" as the greatest good. We become passionless, non-thinking, uninvolved, and we hand over important considerations to "the experts," evading our deepest responsibility and marooning ourselves with the merely technical. As we separate means from ends, we begin to see our students as subjects for manipulation. Moral considerations become irrelevant; in the banal language of our time, we are each merely discharging our duties, following orders, simply doing our jobs.

Becoming more than this, resisting this view of teaching is what Greene has in mind when she talks about "the difficult matter of moral choice." She is thinking in part of the ways in which teachers become representatives of adult culture and society to the young, the ways in which we are engaged, sometimes consciously, some-

times unwittingly, in a larger project of inculcating youngsters into a particular social world, a specific set of relationships, "a distinctive way of life." Teachers may have more down-to-earth goals, and the words "socialization" and "acculturation" may seem lofty, alien, or inappropriate to describe classroom reality, but perceived through a larger historical lens, teachers are indeed part of a society's attempt to reproduce itself and stay alive. Teaching is more than transmitting skills; it is a living act, and involves preference and value, obligation and choice, trust and care, commitment and justification.

A teacher in South Africa, for example, must consider his own classroom experience, the math and science or language arts, his own teaching, but he must also be aware of the school system with its strict racial categories and restrictions. The schools, of course, are a part of the system of apartheid, they mirror it and reproduce it, and so he must think about the larger society outside his school or classroom, and about how it impacts his teaching. If he teaches in a school for white children, there is one set of requirements and expectations—a higher set—and if he teaches in a school for "colored" or African children, different requirements and expectations. The schools pass along the received conventions of the society, and they sort children according to that particular wisdom. There is in South Africa a harsh division in all things, and that division rests on an educational system that offers a small group of white people an education for privilege and power, and the great mass of non-white people an education that will, it is hoped, fit them for lives of exploitation and control. Each South African teacher is expected to pass along the culture's goals and attitudes and aims; each is to play a small part in keeping South African society as it is. Aware of this, each teacher must somehow wrestle with the problem of values and justifications.

Perhaps this is an extreme example. But if we turn to China or to Poland, Germany, Nicaragua, or Peru, the same problem presents itself. Schools serve societies in all kinds of direct and indirect ways. Societies set up schools as institutional forms for the recreation of specific values and norms, dispositions and assumptions. Teachers must somehow warrant these larger social goals and values in order to teach easily and comfortably; if they cannot, then they must find ways to teach in an alternative way, perhaps as an act of resistance. Perhaps this is one reason why the schools in South Africa, and elsewhere, have become such a pivotal point of struggle; why stu-

dents and teachers have become so active and public in their opposition to government policies; and why school reform and struggle within schools have become a regular part of our own landscape.

There is no American exception, and the problem is as real in the United States as it is anywhere. Of course, this is a time of intense doubt and confusion in our own society, of fundamental questioning and serious reconsideration. It is a time of changing roles and expectations and a time of conflicting demands on schools and teachers. While uncertainty and upheaval may encourage a tendency to seek solace in easy answers, those answers—those references to convention or precedent, or higher authority—in many instances simply will not hold. The teacher must find ways to choose and to act in a shifting, uncertain world. She must find ways to take responsibility for her teaching without guarantees. This, as we shall see, requires a teacher to be wide-awake and fully present in her teaching; it requires a kind of heroism in the classroom.

The teacher who embraces the "difficult matter of moral choice" is thrust face to face with students in a classroom. At some level she has already addressed a fundamental ethical question, for she has chosen the task of empowering others. This is so because whatever subject or discipline or approach she follows, she is engaged in an activity designed (by someone's definition) to improve or enable or endow others. All teaching, consciously or unconsciously, explicitly or implicitly, deals, therefore, with two questions: What knowledge and experiences are most worthwhile? And, what are the means to strengthen, invigorate, and enable each person to take full advantage of those worthwhile experiences and that valuable knowledge?

Of course, neither question has an easy, straightforward or universal answer for every individual in every situation. The dizzying diversity of human experience and capacity alone demands that teachers look deeply at our students, that we see them as creatures *like* ourselves, and yet unique in important ways. This is a central challenge of teaching, and it is essentially a moral challenge; it cannot be resolved by referring to fact or to empirical data alone. There is no single, provable answer. There are several possible answers, and infinite possible courses of action to follow. We are left to think about what ought to be and what ought not to be; we are left to investigate and inquire into and with our students, and to interrogate the larger contexts of our teaching; we are left to choose among

conflicting claims, and this requires thinking critically and intensely about possible courses and outcomes. If teachers want their students to acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of mind that will allow them to live fully and well, to be strong and capable and competent, and to have the capacity to shape their individual and collective destinies, then they must struggle to figure out how to realize these lofty goals in specific situations with particular students. When do they focus their efforts on teaching what they consider necessary skills, and when do they allow students to act and to initiate? When do they nurture and hold close, and when do they let go? How do they know when they are doing the right thing?

For Greene, the answer lies in teachers learning how to "do philosophy." She means that teachers can approach teaching and learning critically and deliberately. They can struggle to stay conscious and alive, resisting the merely routine. They can use the findings of social scientists, for example, not as universal truths, but as something to be examined, considered, contemplated. It means they can hold even their own experiences as tentative, contingent, and open to question. "Doing philosophy" means being self-aware and highly conscious of the world around us. And it means attending again and again to a fundamental teaching question: "Given what I now know (about the world, about this class, about this student before me), what should I do?" As Greene (1973) says:

Involved individuals have to make the moral choices which are ordinarily specific. The more sensitive teachers are to the demands of the process of justification, the more explicit they are about the norms that govern their actions, the more personally engaged they are in assessing surrounding circumstances and potential consequences, the more "ethical" they will be; and we cannot ask much more. (p. 221)

Nel Noddings (1986) helps, too, by arguing that teachers can be aided in the "difficult matter of moral choice" if they can adopt an "ethic of caring." For Noddings, the central issue is not following a specific duty or principle, but rather being true in a direct, immediate sense to people with whom one has a relationship:

Natural caring—the sort of response made when we want to care for another [a loved one, a baby, a sick friend] establishes the ideal for ethical caring, and ethical caring imitates the ideal in its efforts to institute, maintain or reestablish natural caring. . . . Persons

guided by an ethic of caring do not ask whether it is their duty to be faithful . . . rather, for them fidelity to persons is fidelity; indeed, fidelity is a quality of the relation and not merely an attribute of an individual moral agent's behavior or character. (p. 385)

This points us in the direction of the whole person. From the perspective of an ethic of caring it is the person before us who becomes our central concern. This does not mean a lack of concern for teaching skills or for academic rigor or excellence, but it does mean that skills are taught, for example, as a result of concern for the person, that is, that the "one is undertaken in light of the other" (p. 387).

The challenge of teaching is to decide who you want to be as a teacher, what you care about and what you value, and how you will conduct yourself in classrooms with students. It is to name yourself as a teacher, knowing that institutional realities will only enable that goal in part (if at all) and that the rest is up to you. It is to choose the rocky road of change. It is to move beyond the world as we find it, with its conventional, received reality, in pursuit of a world and a reality that could be, but is not yet.

It is, furthermore, to choose to do something that enables the choices of others, that supports the human impulse to grow. In this sense it is to choose teaching not as a job only, and not even as a career or a profession. It is to choose teaching as a project or a vocation, something one is called to do. In a vocation like teaching there is a vital link between private and public worlds, between personal fulfillment and social responsibility. There is also a sense of commitment and purpose that rejects the measured calculation that pervades so much of work today. Teaching is the vocation of vocations, because to choose teaching is to choose to enable the choices of others. It is to be about the business of empowerment, the business of enabling others to choose well. There are all kinds of skills, tools, dispositions, and opportunities required for these broad choices to be made, and teachers must somehow become responsible for all of it.

Because society is indifferent and because we as members of society are floating in a kind of purposelessness, it is easy to dismiss talk of ethical action as romantic, foolish, or even quaint. This image of quaintness is intensified in schools increasingly bent toward a narrow agenda of efficiency and control. But we need to talk of values—of what ought to be—if we are ever to really understand ourselves, our situations, and our options, and if we are ever

to undertake meaningful action toward improvement in schools or in society. The problems we face today are not essentially technical or material problems; they are, at their heart, moral problems.

Teaching is an act of hope for a better future. The rewards of teaching are neither ostentatious nor obvious—they are often internal, invisible, and of the moment. But paradoxically, they can be deeper, more lasting, and less illusory than the cut of your clothes or the size of your home. The rewards are things like watching a youngster make a connection and come alive to a particular literacy, discipline, or way of thinking, or seeing another child begin to care about something or someone in a way that he never cared before, or observing a kid become a person of values because you treated her as a valuable person. There is a particularly powerful satisfaction in caring in a time of carelessness, and of thinking for yourself in a time of thoughtlessness. The reward of teaching is knowing that your life makes a difference.

2

Seeing the Student

Teaching is an interactive practice that begins and ends with seeing the student. This is more complicated than it seems, for it is something that is ongoing and never completely finished. The student grows and changes, the teacher learns, the situation shifts, and seeing becomes an evolving challenge. As layers of mystification and obfuscation are peeled away, as the student becomes more fully present to the teacher, experiences and ways of thinking and knowing that were initially obscure become the ground on which real teaching can be constructed.

Our youngest child came into our family when he was fourteen months old—unexpected, unannounced. Chesa was set adrift when his biological parents—close, long-time friends of ours—could no longer care for him. His grandparents kept him for a short time, and then he came to us.

For a long time, he was an easy child—agreeable, eager to please, perhaps a bit compliant. He was never fussy, never demanding. On the other side, he never displayed much enthusiasm: His play lacked commitment and his explorations of the world were tentative. He watched his new brothers at play, one of them almost four years older, and the other just half a year older, but he joined in rather reluctantly. He was subject to every sore throat and ear infection that came near him and both his physical strength and his affect seemed to be at low ebb. He was downcast, depressed. Later his depression gave way to an explosive anger, often self-directed. He was clumsy, both physically and socially, and he would frequently crash into people and things—often hurting himself or angering others—and afterwards genuinely wonder what had happened.